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POLYTHEISM IN PRIMITIVE ISRAEL.

THE first words of the Hebrew Bible are significant of the gulf which separates Israel of the law from Israel before the law. "In the beginning," we are told, "Elohim created the heavens and the earth." The verb is singular, but its nominative has a plural form. From the earliest days of Biblical study the fact has forced itself upon the attention of the scholar, and various attempts have been made to explain the origin of such a use of the plural *Elohim*. It has been called a *pluralis majestatis*, and grammarians and theologians have united in seeing in it an expression of the omnipotence of the Hebrew Deity and his exaltation over all other gods.

But the student of linguistic science cannot be satisfied with this or any similar explanation. He knows that language is not the cunningly-devised invention of priests and philologists, and that words and forms of words do not enter into common use because they express the ideas of scholars and theologians. People do not employ a plural form to express a singular idea unless that singular idea had once been conceived of as a plural. We may speak of "a means to an end," but when the word was first received into English speech, it represented more "means" than one. Words, in fact, are like fossils; they preserve for us older modes of thought and belief embedded within the skeleton of their outward form. *Elohim* would never have come to denote the singular "God" had it not first denoted the plural "gods."

The Old Testament itself bears witness to the fact. Apart from the use of the word to denote the "gods" of the heathen (Gen. xxxi. 30; Exod. xii. 12; Ps. xcvi. 7, etc.), or even the princes of an earthly state (Ps. lxxxii. 1), we find it employed with a plural verb in one or two old phrases which have been preserved by ancient tradition. Thus in Gen. i. 26, Elohim says: "Let *us* make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness"; and in Gen. xi. 7, when the Tower of Babel was being built even Yahveh is described as saying, "Go to, let *us* go down and there confound their language." Of course the Christian

fathers found in these expressions an allusion to the doctrine of the Trinity, and equally of course the Jewish Rabbis discovered in them a reference to the angels; the modern student of language is forbidden to read into his text ideas which belong to a later age.

A recent discovery has shown that the application of the plural "gods" to a single person goes back to a period when as yet the Israelites had not entered the Promised Land. Clay tablets inscribed with cuneiform characters and written in the Babylonian language have been found among the ruins of the palace of Amenôphis IV. at Telel-Amarna on the Nile, and prove to be despatches to the Egyptian king from the kings and governors of Babylonia and Assyria, of Syria, of Mesopotamia, and of Palestine. Palestine was at the time under Egyptian rule and administered by Egyptian officers. But the officers for the most part bore Semitic names of a Canaanitish stamp, and the language of the despatches they forwarded to their Egyptian master is tinged with a Canaanitish colouring. Now in the protocol of these, the Egyptian sovereign is not only termed "sun-god" and "god," but "gods" as well. A writer, for instance, who dates from what was afterwards the territory of Judah, addresses his letter to the king, "my lord, my gods, my sun-god." The employment of the plural for the singular in the case of the divine name was accordingly familiar to Canaanitish lips and pens long before the invasion of Joshua.

The usage of Canaan naturally became the usage of Israel. It must be remembered that Hebrew was, as is stated by Isaiah (xix. 18), "the language of Canaan," and since the decipherment of the Phœnician inscriptions it has been recognised by scholars that it must have been adopted by the Israelites from their predecessors in the land. It is probable that the primitive language of Israel was one of those Aramæan dialects which were spoken in the deserts of Northern Arabia and in the fastnesses of Edom and Midian. However this may be, the Hebrew of the Bible was originally the language of the Canaanitish tribes.

But the Hebrew of the Bible continued to bear traces of its twofold ancestry. By the side of Elohîm, with its singular Eloah, we find the word El in the sense of "God." Now the use of El and Eloah (or rather Elâh) separates the two great divisions of the ancient Semitic world almost as effectually as the use of Elohîm and Yahveh has been held to separate one component part of the Book of Genesis from another. While Elâh was unknown to the Phœnicians, the Assyrians, and the Babylonians, El was unknown to the

Aramæan and Arabian tribes, except where it entered into the composition of archaic proper names.¹ In Hebrew alone the two words stand side by side. But the use of El is closely restricted. After a careful examination of the passages in which it occurs, Professor Baethgen sums up as follows: "From the time of Amos onward it is avoided by the larger number of writers; in others it occurs occasionally, but only in poetical quotations. It is also found certainly in rhetorical passages (in Isaiah and the latter parts of Deuteronomy), as well as in archaic passages (in Exodus) and the poetical prose of Genesis, but more especially in the purely poetical Books of Job and the Psalms. Hence we may conclude that El in Hebrew is pre-eminently a poetical and archaic word which remained foreign to the living speech, or at least to ordinary prose where it was replaced by Elohim."

This conclusion, however, admits of modification. El did not "*remain* foreign to the living speech," it became so in the course of time. This is shown by the large number of proper names which were compounded with it, and which continued to be compounded with it down to comparatively recent times. The system of nomenclature became crystallised, or the Hebrew language began to die out before Elohim obtained so strong a hold on the linguistic consciousness of the people as to allow it to be introduced into proper names. The proper names survived to assure us that there was a time when El, and not Elohim, was the common name of "God" in the language of Canaan.

We can assign a reason for its gradual disappearance. Baal was once a title of Yahveh, but the associations connected with the title caused it to be discountenanced by the prophets. Hosea (ii. 16) announced that the Lord would no longer be called Baali, and names like Mephi-Baal and Baal-yada were changed into Mephi-bosheth and El-yada. The name of Baal disappeared from the vocabulary of the pious Israelite except in reference to the gods of the heathen, and there is, accordingly, but little trace of it in the pages of the Old Testament. The same evil associations which haunted the name of Baal, haunted also the name of El. It recalled the old days of darkness, as well as the actual beliefs of pagan neighbours. El still denoted a god of Phœnicia, and doubtless also of places within the boundaries of Israel itself. Its gradual disappearance from the language of the prophets is not difficult to account for.

¹ See Baethgen's *Excurs* at the end of his *Beiträge zur Semitischen Religionsgeschichte* (Berlin, 1888).

Such a disappearance must have been co-eval with the change in the meaning of the plural Elohim. The usage of the Canaanitish language, before the Israelites had even learned to speak it, prepared the way for the change. Pharaoh could be addressed as "my gods," because, like the sun-god, he embodied the powers and attributes of the various deities who governed the universe. He was as it were the concrete impersonation of their manifold manifestations. Those who addressed him in such language were necessarily believers in a plurality of gods, and no one would maintain the contrary. It was because the Canaanitish officers of Amenophis believed in "gods many and lords many" that they saw in him the visible embodiment of them all. The application of the plural term to a single individual implies polytheism on the part of those who applied it.

What holds good of the Canaanitish officers of the Pharaoh, holds equally good of the Israelites who first ventured to use the plural Elohim of their national God. And the fact that the Israelites never forgot that it was a plural term, that up to the last they often employed it in a plural sense, proves that the earliest users of it were worshippers of many deities. They recognised Elohim as well as El.

How late this recognition lasted is indicated even in the Old Testament. It was not only Rachel (Gen. xxxi. 19), and David (1 Sam. xix. 13), who placed their households under the protection of the teraphim or images of the household gods; the Prophet Hosea himself (iii. 4) paints the coming desolation of Israel as a time when the people shall have to "abide many days without a king, and without a prince, and without a sacrifice, and without an image, and without an ephod, and without teraphim." We may gather from the history of Micah, in Judges xviii., that the worship of the teraphim was the necessary accompaniment of the tribal worship of Yahveh, as represented by a "carved image," and in the case of the Tribe of Dan at all events, it lasted "until the day of the captivity of the land" (Judges xviii. 17, 18, 30). As elsewhere, the older cult of the household survived by the side of the worship of the tribal deity; the old household gods were still revered, though subordinated, like the household itself, to the supreme god of the whole community. Yahveh was not yet conceived of as the sole god; he was still but "God of gods and Lord of lords" (Deut. x. 17). Even the Psalmist declares (xcv. 3), that "the Lord is a great King above all gods" and calls upon all the gods to worship him (xcvii. 7).

It was in Judah that the older cult first died out of the

popular belief. After the division of the kingdom, Judah with its central capital at Jerusalem formed a compact and organised community, in which the earlier tribal distinctions which had marked it off from Simeon, or Dan or Benjamin were soon obliterated. The dynasty of David welded the community together, and the temple of Solomon became more and more the centre of the common faith. The worship that was carried on in it, the belief of which it was the outward expression, the religious teaching and influence which emanated from it, gradually affected the ideas and convictions of the Jewish people. A time came at length when Josiah could venture to destroy the "high-places" where the old local cults had been carried on for unnumbered generations, and order his subjects to "worship before the altar" at Jerusalem alone.

Doubtless the local cults had ceased in many, if not in most instances, to imply what we should now call polytheism. The deity adored on each of the "high-places" was doubtless nominally a form of Yahveh. Even the brazen serpent, to which incense was burned within the precincts of the temple itself as late as the days of Hezekiah (2 Kings xviii. 4), may have been regarded as an image or manifestation of the national God. But the very passage which tells us of the brazen serpent, also tells us that as at Dan and Bethel, so too, in the cities of Judah, images stood on the high-places, and not only images but symbols of Asherah, the goddess of fertility, as well. Moreover, even where the high-place was dedicated in name to Yahveh alone, it was to Yahveh under a particular form, and as identified with a particular local deity. The high-places had been sanctuaries long before the Israelites entered Canaan, and as long as they continued to be holy, it was inevitable that the old worship would live on in them under a new name. What happened in Europe when the wild tribes of Germany or Anglo-Saxon England, were first converted to Christianity, must have happened also in Palestine, when the Israelites first brought with them the name and worship of their national God.

The frequent lapses of the Israelites into idolatry are a standing witness of the narrow partition which divided the religion of the majority from the polytheistic beliefs of their Semitic kinsfolk. Whether we accept the views of the modern school of evolutionary historians, who see in these so-called lapses but so many stages in the progressive religious education of the people, or whether we fall back on the old doctrine, like Professor Baethgen, and regard them as really lapses from a purer form of faith, is of little consequence.

The fact remains that, as soon as the pressure of the central government was removed, or the enthusiasm kindled by a popular prophet was quenched, there was at once a rebound to the adoration of the Baalim and Ashtaroth of an earlier time. Such rebounds must be carefully distinguished from the attempts made by the government itself to supersede the worship of the Baalim of Israel by the Baalim of Phœnicia or Syria; attempts like these were never successful, and even in the northern kingdom were extinguished in blood. But while Hebrew idolatry remained intensely national, it was idolatry all the same.

Now this idolatry was necessarily polytheistic, if by polytheism we mean the belief in more gods than one. Renan, it is true, has asserted that the Semitic race is fundamentally monotheistic, and his assertion has been endorsed by several other scholars. From one point of view, indeed, it may be justified. Semitic religion tended towards monotheism; its essential character was such that a philosophic thinker who was himself a monotheist, could at any time have demonstrated that it led logically to monotheism. But philosophic thinkers do not usually appear among primitive communities; it is not until a certain stage of culture and civilisation is reached, that people begin to reason about their beliefs, and to enquire into their nature and origin. However much Semitic religion might from the outset have contained the seeds of monotheism, they were long in bearing fruit. The most cultivated of the Semitic communities, the Phœnicians, the Assyrians and the Babylonians, were grossly polytheistic; and we have only to go to Mohammedan writers to learn how deeply rooted was the polytheism of Western Arabia before the rise of Islam. Inscriptions show that the Aramæans and Yemenites were equally polytheistic; on every high-place and under every green tree incense was burned to divinities innumerable.

But these divinities were also in great measure repetitions one of the other. They were for the most part mere local forms or manifestations of the supreme Baal, "the Lord" of heaven, and his divine wife. To the primitive-Semite the divine declared itself in growth and decay. It was the power which produced and destroyed life. Wherever life existed or could be destroyed the divine was visible to the eye of faith. The god worshipped by the faithful was a god of fertility who caused the seed to grow in his goodness, or consumed it in his wrath. It was in the sun, with his vivifying beams, that the Semite saw the concrete form of his deity. Life seemed to depend on the will of the great

luminary of day, nurtured as it was by the kindly rays of spring, or parched and withered in the fierce heats of summer. The sun was the visible emblem of the power which supported or menaced life.

The supreme object, therefore, of the Semitic cult was the "Lord" and "father," who gave and took away life, and who manifested himself to his worshippers in the orb of the sun. But the "father" and giver of life necessarily implied a female consort. By the side of the supreme Baal necessarily stood the supreme Baalah, like the woman by the side of the man. The Semite's conception of the woman, however, was not that of races among whom the mother stands at the head of the family. To him she was but the colourless double of man, the docile helpmeet, who had been created from his loins, whose desire was to her husband, and over whom the husband should rule (Gen. iii. 16). Baalah, therefore, was but the pale reflection of Baal, the necessary complement of a deity, whose lineaments were derived from his vivifying and paternal functions. As the masculine noun in the Semitic languages had its corresponding feminine, so the masculine Baal was accompanied by the feminine Baalah. But the features of the wife were absorbed in those of her husband, and except where the worship of a foreign female divinity had taken strong hold of the popular belief, it was not difficult in time to forget her altogether. The "face of Baal" or "El" (*Pené Baal, Peni-el*)¹ ceased in time to recall the feminine counterpart of the God, and like "the face of Yahveh" (Gen. x. 9; Exodus xxxiii. 20, etc.), came to denote little more than the male deity himself. The colourless character of Baalah assisted the prophets in rooting out such elements of polytheism as were associated with the belief in a female divinity. It was only where the worship of the virgin goddess of non-Semitic Babylonia had made its way, only where Istar or Astarté, "queen of heaven with crescent horns," had taken equal rank with Baal, that they failed in their task. In Phœnicia, the voice of the monotheist would have been lifted up in vain.

But even in a country like Babylonia, where the Semitic population was largely mixed with foreign elements, and where the national pantheon was filled with the gods and goddesses of an alien faith, there are traces of a striving to discover an underlying unity in the manifold objects of popular belief. Not only are there references in the hymns

¹ See my Hibbert Lectures on the *Religion of the Ancient Babylonians*, pp. 110, 111.

to "the one God"; there are also tablets in which the older deities of the pantheon are resolved into forms of the supreme god Anu. At Sippara, in northern Babylonia, a city more distinctively Semitic than most of its fellows, a school arose which consecrated itself to the worship of the sun-god. The hymns which formed part of its ritual not unfrequently describe the sun-god in language which seems at first sight to imply that he was the one and only God. But the illusion is momentary only. We have not to read far before we find that the poets accepted without questioning the existence of other deities, though to them the sun-god was not only the supreme lord of heaven, but the god in whom were reflected, as it were, the attributes and powers of all other divinities. In Assyria, the priests and poets went yet further than in Babylonia. Asshur, the national god of the kingdom, overshadowed his divine compeers, so that at times they seem to disappear altogether. He is "the king of all the gods," "the father, who has created them"; in his name, and with his help the Assyrian armies go forth to conquer, and it is to bring fresh worshippers to his shrine that the lands of the foreigner are invaded. He stands alone; it was only some pedant, versed in Babylonian literature, who found for him a consort. In the general belief of the Assyrian people, Asshur was wifeless, like Yahveh of Israel. It needed, seemingly, but a little to transform the worship of Asshur into a worship as pure as that of Yahveh. But the little was wanting; the message proclaimed by the law and the prophets was delivered to Israel, and not to Assyria; the Assyrian, indeed, came near to monotheism, but it was reserved for another people to listen to the words, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one Lord."

In Israel itself it was long before the meaning of the words was fully realised. As we have seen, the services at the high places, and the use of the teraphim—practices implying a belief in a plurality of gods—lasted down to the captivity, and until the age of Hezekiah do not seem to have been regarded as otherwise than right. The readiness to fall into idolatry proved how little distinction the people in general could see between the popular faith of Israel and that of the nations around them. When David could ask Saul whether "the children of men" had driven him out "from abiding in the inheritance of the Lord, saying, Go, serve other gods" (1 Sam. xxvi. 19), it is evident that the belief in these "other gods" was a very real and living one. Yahveh was the God of the Jew as long as the Jew remained in Israel; but the exile passed beyond his dominion and power, and entered the

service of the deity in whose land he found a refuge. The power of the national God extended only so far as the nation itself. We are reminded of the words of Ruth (i. 16), "Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God."

The first step in the religious education of Israel, which prepared it for receiving the divine message of the law and the prophets, was to identify the national God with the gods of the numerous local cults which existed within his territory. It was not difficult to do so. As we have seen, the Baalim of the Semites were almost indistinguishable from one another; they were all alike manifestations of that vital force and energy which had its visible centre in the sun. As tribe conquered tribe, or the cities of Palestine were absorbed into a common power, the local Baalim were necessarily identified with each other. Just as the Babylonian scribe had resolved the older gods into forms of Anu, so in Palestine the Baalim or "lords" of the smaller towns were resolved into forms of the Baal who watched over the destinies of the capital city. The process was aided by the epithetical character of the names borne by most of them. If the name were not Baal, "lord," it was likely to be El "God" or Moloch, "king." The names, in fact, were usually titles, the distinction between one local deity and another being supplied by the name of the locality itself, or of some object there with which he was specially associated. If he were not the Baal of Perazim, he was Baal-Zebub, the "Baal of the flies," who thronged his oracle at Ekron.

From the days when the Semites first began to lead settled lives, the process of identification had been going on. A large number of proper names declares the fact. It was more especially the title El, which at an early period had acquired the sense of "God," that lent itself to the work. The Assyrians formed names like Samsi-ilu, "Samas (the sun-god) is El"; Tsidqi-ilu, "Tsedeq is El"; Ilu-milik, "El is Moloch," and the geographical lists of the Egyptian king Thothmes III. at Karnak present us with such names of Canaanitish localities as Yaâqab-el, "Jacob is El," and Yesep-el, "Joseph is El." A similar compound is met with in Joshua xix. 14, 27, where we read of the Valley of Jiphthah-el or "Jephthah is El," a compound which differs but little from that of Joel, "Yahveh is El," or the converse Eli-Yahu, "El is Yahveh." As time went on, the process of identification was extended to deities, both of whom bore names of an individual, and not a general, stamp. The Assyrian texts contain such names as Samsi-Raman, "Samas is Rimmon"; Assur-Â, "Assur is Â"; Nergal-Â, "Nergal is Â"; and Zechariah (xii. 11)

speaks of the mourning for the sun-god Hadad-Rimmon, where the Assyrian Rimmon is identified with the Syrian Hadad, as he is on one of the cuneiform tablets. It was only needful for the process of identification to proceed far enough for the whole of the Semitic pantheon—so far at least as the male divinities were concerned—to be resolved into a single god. In time the Baalim would become Baal.

But we cannot reverse the process. We cannot suppose that the gods were conceived of as one and the same before they were thus identified. Samas and Rimmon continued to be distinct and different divinities to the mass of Assyrians, even after some bold thinker had declared them to be but forms of the same divinity. The very fact that such names as Joel or Hadad-Rimmon were invented implies that the deities whose names are united in them were once regarded as separate. If it had always been admitted that Yahveh was identical with El, there would have been no necessity for emphasising the fact. The existence of names like these brings with it the assurance that Israel as much as Assyria had once been polytheistic.

Natural causes prepared the nation for receiving the message of the law and the prophets. The epithetic character of the names given to the local deities of Canaan allowed them to be readily identified with the national God. There was little difficulty in discovering Yahveh in the Baal of Dan or Bethel. The unification of the Israelitish tribes, and above all the consolidation of the Jewish kingdom necessarily brought with it a unification and consolidation of religious worship and belief. When Jerusalem became the religious as well as the political centre of the people, it was inevitable that the religion of the court should become the religion of the subject, and that the autocratic political sovereign should be regarded as the type and representative of an autocratic spiritual sovereign. As the nation acknowledged only one king, so too, the suppression of the provincial centres of worship led it more and more to acknowledge only one spiritual ruler. It is probable that the Assyrian wars largely aided in producing this result. Not only did they arouse a national spirit of resistance to the invader, but they forced the whole people as it were into the capital. Jerusalem alone held out against the enemy; the rest of Judah was overrun, its towns and villages destroyed, and their inhabitants carried into captivity. Those only who had found a refuge in Jerusalem escaped the general disaster; it was out of Mount Zion that the remnant came forth which restored the name of Judah and inhabited again the depopulated land.

The old local cults had been swept away, the traditions of the past had been broken with, and the temple of Yahveh at Jerusalem remained without rivals or compeers.

But there had been a still more powerful influence at work, disintegrating and destroying the old belief in polytheism. Semitic polytheism found its main support in the worship of female deities. The gods resembled one another too much, it was too easy to resolve them into forms or manifestations of a single divinity, for them to stand alone. Where polytheism continued to flourish, as in Phœnicia or Babylonia, it was where the worship of Astartê took equal rank with the worship of Baal. Among the tribes with whom the Hebrews claimed the nearest connection, the worship of the ancient Accadian goddess never made much way. Of purer blood than the inhabitants of Phœnicia or Babylonia, they clung more faithfully to the old Semitic conception, which saw in the woman the reflection of the man, and in the female deity the mere complement of the male. In process of time, accordingly, the features of the female deity became more and more obliterated, she fell more and more into the background and hardly survived except in old expressions and forms of speech. The Moabite Stone affords at once a proof and an illustration of this fact. In the inscription of Mesha, the national god Chemosh is all in all. He has absorbed the attributes and worship of the local Baalim as completely as Yahveh of Israel. Once and once only is reference made to another deity as worshipped within the limits of Moab. This deity is Ashtoreth. But it is no longer the female Ashtoreth, whom the servants of Chemosh adore. Ashtoreth has become the male Ashtor, and as such has been identified with Chemosh. It is to Ashtor-Chemosh that the captive women of Israel were consecrated.

Nothing can show more plainly how foreign to the Moabite mind was the conception of an independent goddess who stood on an equal footing with the god. She is first transformed into a male divinity and then absorbed into the national god.

What held good of the Moabites held good also of their Israelitish kinsfolk. So far as these were the descendants of the desert tribes who had wrested Palestine from the hands of its Canaanitish masters, they had little inclination for the worship of female divinities. Ashtoreth and Asherah were deities of the older inhabitants of the land, not of their conquerors. Little by little the colourless feminine reflections of the male god faded into the background, the "face of El" became "El" himself, while El became indistinguishable

from Yahveh. It may be that those are right who hold that every Semitic god once had his female counterpart, and that as Elah was the wife and female double of El, so Yahveh was but the consort of the male Yahu. But such consorts had a grammatical rather than a religious existence, and have for us an archæological or linguistic interest only. They are fast disappearing from Israelitish memory when the religious history of Israel first begins, and with them disappears the main support of early Semitic polytheism. Where, instead of disappearing, they developed and absorbed the cult of Astartê, a polytheism of the grossest kind was the result. Happily for Israel, there were a chosen few within it who remained true to their ancient stock and faith, and awaited the day when it was revealed to them: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord."

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